



[Bantu Stephen Biko, 1946-1977](#)

Bantu Stephen Biko

A shocking proportion of the revolutionary writers whom we are featuring in this African Revolutionary Writers series were assassinated by the Imperialist enemy. These include Eduardo Mondlane, Amilcar Cabral and Ruth First; Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Patrice Lumumba; and still to come in the series, Huey Newton, Thomas Sankara, Walter Rodney and Muammar Gaddafi.

Steve Biko is another one of the revolutionary intellectuals who were cold-bloodedly killed by the guilty ones who could not bear the power of his words and the frankness of his accusations. We honour him, and are sure that he will always be honoured in South Africa and in the world.

Many books, films and songs have been made about Steve Biko. There is a [Steve Biko Foundation](#), and a [Steve Biko Memorial Lecture](#) is given each year by a famous person.

According to the Steve Biko Foundation web site, Biko was “among a breed of African thinkers universally who include W.E.B. Dubois, Aime Cesaire, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral, Cheik Anta Diop, Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, among others.” All of these are included in our African Revolutionary Writers series, and so is Steve Biko. But was Biko the same as these others, and even if so, was he different to others again who are not on the Steve Biko Foundation’s list, or even on ours?

In other words: Having honoured Biko, how do we read him critically? How do we place him? Biko’s present-day supporter, Xolela Mangcu, has recently called Biko “South Africa’s philosopher leader – but not philosopher king”. But if Steve Biko was a philosopher, he might have been expected to develop a comprehensive philosophical system, as Hegel or Kant did, for example. But Biko, whose famous, but short, collection of articles and speeches is called “[I Write What I Like](#)”, did not actually like to write much, and did not attempt to write a general philosophy, or any other kind of dedicated book-length work for that matter.

The amount of Biko’s writing that is available on the Internet appears to be limited to the main text linked below, which is a transcript of an interview that he did with the US scholar Gail Gerhart. In this interview, answering Gerhart’s question about

the origins of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), Biko says:

"... others of course are much more avid readers than I am. They do a lot of reading, they do a lot of writing, interpretation, and so on. So that element has that kind of effect. What I'm saying is that it's a complementary effect upon a basic attitude formed primarily from experience, from an analysis of the situation as one sees it."

Asked about PAC leader Robert Sobukwe, Biko says: *"I have never heard him express an opinion about the details of the ideology, which makes him again a very admirable guy. Unlike ANC ranks and other ranks, his major concern is about continued opposition to the system... There's no more PAC, there's no more ANC; there's just the struggle. And this is the kind of ideology that they're talking."*

This looks as if what Biko had in mind was an ideology of no ideology, and a movement of activism without much writing.

Right at the end, Biko concludes:

"... the growth of the townships in the pattern that they are now growing makes communication also all that much easier. Communication not necessarily through shared platforms, shared meetings and so on, but communication of ideas through a shared, common stimulus. Because everybody has to stay in a specific area. I'm talking here mainly about the African population. If I go to Jo'burg I know

automatically, I don't have to choose: I just have to go and stay in Soweto, whether I could afford a house in Lower Houghton or not.

“So this thing of talking for or on behalf of the masses is nonsense, because you live with them, you stay with them; you make your inputs primarily because you are there, and no physical distance or intellectual distance is ultimately created. A guy who's a priest or a teacher or something like this in an area is forced by circumstances to relate to the neighbors that society has created for him. He doesn't choose neighbors. So that he carves his place in that community. Alright, he might be regarded as a man of major import, primarily because he can put several words together much faster than anybody else, but the important thing is that even he himself sees himself as a member of that community. And in this whole conscientization program, this is what makes ideas so easily flow across amongst people; this common ghetto experience that blacks are subjected to.”

It's difficult not to recognise, in this final passage, the preferred classlessness of the middle classes, which is a version of the very same liberalism (though in that case it was the white variety) that Biko rejected so emphatically in life, and explicitly in the earlier parts of this particular interview.

Ngugi wrote, of the early literature of African liberation: *“Were there classes in Africa? No! cried the nationalist politician, and the writer seemed to echo him.”* (The Writer in a Neo-Colonial State, 1986)

If the intellectual, as well as “*a priest or a teacher*”, or Xolela Mangcu or Julius Malema for that matter, or Fikile Mbalula the proponent of “vibrancy”; if all of these can take for granted that they are at one with the masses, with no “*intellectual distance*” from the masses, then the problem of the alienation of the intellectual is solved, the vanguard and the mass are one, and no special “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” will be required.

This is where the Communist University finds itself differing with the martyr Steve Biko, with all due respect to his memory. The problem of class is a real one - just as real as the problem of race. The problem of pedagogy is a real one. The nature of the vanguard is a problem, yes, but the vanguard is still a necessity. The nature of neo-colonialism, based on class, is a real problem.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Steve Biko, Interview with Gail Gerhart, 24 October 1972.](#)
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here.](#)